

# **ACADEMIC IDENTITIES AND THE DIGITAL SELF? A CROSS CULTURAL STUDY OF DIGITISATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION TEACHING**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This study seeks to understand the changing academic identities of higher education teaching academics as they inhabit an increasingly digitized locus of teaching and learning. Using interviews and a selection of ethnographic approaches, (e.g. photographs as elicitation, workplace participant observation) this paper explores lecturers narratives of change and fluid academic selves presented in discussion on the performance space of the online arena. Participants were recruited from two HEIs (UK and Middle East based) that were at different points on a digitization continuum, with varying interpretations of the importance of this medium to pedagogic design. The aim is to surface shared and differing experiences between digital as integrated in a curriculum or as complement to traditional teaching materials, with a particular focus upon adaptations to academic identity. The paper takes three initial areas for early exploration; building rapport on line, synthesizing what students need to know and standardization vs individualization.

## **KEYWORDS**

Ethnography, Academic Identity, Digitisation, Higher Education

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

It has been recognized in the Higher Education context that student retention and success are enhanced by a triangulation of context, institutional culture, and a relationship to place (Stuart 2017). However, in the UK, with moves to expanding online learning platforms, this raises important questions about parallel moves to a digital 'locus' for teaching and learning and its associated impact on the students and teaching staff who inhabit this space. Whilst many institutions have taken advantage of analytics technologies to assess issues of student engagement online, the views and lived experiences of tutors at this new coalface of teaching and learning are largely underreported.

This study reports on the impact of a new, digitized teaching identity for teaching academics and shared pedagogical experiences of tutors working in both a distance learning university and face to face institution where digital is a secondary, if necessary concern. Part of this analysis aimed to surface cultural teaching practices online, not least the continued importance of face to face teaching in the Middle East, compared with a UK institution rushing to embrace innovative online pedagogical solutions.

## **2. LITERATURE**

### **2.1 Changes to Higher Education**

Whilst there were many shared experiences about the understanding of and potential movement to a digital locus for pedagogy, the wider institutional perspectives were an area of differentiation between the two groups of respondents. In the UK, online provision has increased due to a combination of Government funding changes and emergent technologies, and the opportunities and threats they provide for established

teaching strategies. In the US context, this is reported on by Tirelli (2014: 527) who highlights growing fiscal elasticity and growing use of casualized labor in academia, in conjunction with increased administration and management, as paralleled in UK studies e.g. Bryson (2004). Whilst digitization of teaching has developed independently from managerialism in higher education, the two are becoming inextricably bound.

For the Middle East, a lack of literature on any digital teaching culture partly reflected the cultural value of face to face interactive teaching, despite the advent of new technologies. The wish to adopt American models and partnerships as a standard of academic and teaching excellence, as well as offer up to the minute digital platforms, however, ensured that a full suite of digital equivalents was presented to students alongside traditional Socratic teaching practices.

## 2.2 Living Digitalized Lives

The fragmented nature of data around digital identities as an emergent field is highlighted by Thomas et al (2017). In their paper, they refer to how the management of these differing identities across dispersed platforms can be a burden (2017: 53). In their discussion what is described as a 'performance' of digital selfhood, they discuss episodic narratives and curating data with reference to Goffman's (1959) self-presentation framework. For educators working online, this depiction of a performance is particularly apt; they note that this 'digital selfhood' develops from online activity albeit impacted by partitioned online contexts. E.g. for teaching this might mean asynchronous online conferencing or chatboards or synchronous learning tools such as Blackboard or Adobe. It might also differentiate between small, 'private' tutor group forums and qualification-wide, 'public' interactions, ranging from 5 to 1,000 students for example. In the teaching context, these online mediated selves are also interspersed with a traditional face to face orientation to students, and a process of creating congruence between these performances.

With growing demand for online tutoring, this facet of academic performance online is continually evolving, and should present an increasing contribution within the wider academic identity literature. Additionally, conversations around an ontological separation of human 'subject' interactions with technological 'object' and the impact on teachers' perceptions of autonomy (see Bayne, 2016 for a wider discussion) are needed to evolve digital pedagogy and personalization of teaching support at scale.

## 2.3 Academic Identities

The developed and research rich field of academic identity studies is too diverse to report on in depth here, however, significant contributions of relevance stem from the work of Alvesson and Willmott (2002) who rendered its importance visible, particularly at times of change where knowledge intense professionals are particularly reported as impacted by conflicting loyalties. These loyalties could be constructed around both the self and within the profession as well as an institution, and support Clarke and Knights (2015) suggestions of academic compliance within a performance environment. Perceptions around agency are particularly noted as fluid and mutable during these shifts, of which digitally-orientated education is very much one. Whilst it is acknowledged that workplace identities undergo change, some facets are only relevant in a specific rather than general context (see Ashforth and Johnson, 2001), Quigley's (2011) comments of academic ontology and epistemology are therefore open for reflection in the light of new, digitally enacted professional selves. Making sense of who we are and what we should do in the workplace come to a head when there is a challenge of our sense of self (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003; Pratt, 2000), and also when we feel a sense of identity incongruence (George and Chattopadhyay, 2005) and we therefore have some difficulty in maintaining a coherent sense of the self (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002).

Beech et al. (2008) and Mallet & Wapshott (2012) have addressed these issues by proposing that it is the context of an organizational change that will result in us as individuals engaging in identity work. Beech (2011) proposed that when we experience the sense of being 'in between' and liminal, we consciously employ identity work practices to solve any potential conflict between two identity constructions, for example our 'on ground' and our 'virtual' identities. Collinson (2003) focused on the feelings of insecurity and the influence this has on our workplace selves. Mirchandani (2003) discussed the emotion involved in constructing and maintaining multiple identities. One research strand examines how we undertake identity work through a process of narrating the self (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003; Beech, 2008; Down & Reveley, 2009; Mallett & Wapshott, 2012; Learmonth & Humphreys, 2012).

Incorporating ideas from narrative identity (Sims, 2005) posited that identity work is conceptualized as the development and “maintenance of a personal narrative” (Watson, 2009, p.432) through which a sense between self and social identity is construed. Being allowed and able to develop and maintain a coherent story of ourselves is one way in which we cope with the complexity of linking the past, present and future, we create a sense of continuity and connectedness constituting meaningful notions of subjectivity by making sense of our various work situations (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000). However, although we are the protagonists of our stories, we are not the sole authors. Beech (2008) argues that narrative identity work “is a combination of writing one’s own story, being written by others and of seeking to write oneself into the stories of others” (p. 54). This argument supports the notion that identity is co-constructed which makes our storytelling of our experiences an interactive process of story-creating (Humphreys and Brown, 2002; Sims, 2005).

### 3. METHODOLOGY

We sampled the views and lived experiences of eighteen teaching staff working in two business faculties. The UK institution is a distance learning provider with increasing focus on digital learning, whilst the Middle Eastern Institution was campus-based with a largely traditional face to face teaching model. Respondents have been anonymized; and comprised a mix of permanent faculty staff and those on adjunct contracts.

In an attempt to co-create knowledge with participants, we asked them to prepare a series of photographs with text-based descriptions as an elicitation tool during the interview. Using a semi-auto- ethnographic approach enabled interviewees to shape the terms and text of semi-structured interviews, whilst also providing rich narratives of “thick” data (Geertz, 1973) and provides a layer of authenticity and criticality (Golden-Biddle and Locke, 1993). Interviews generally took around an hour, but we were additionally able to interact with our participants in their normal teaching environments and observe their interactions with students and other faculty staff in those contexts (face to face and online). The enlarged sphere of interaction enabled the capturing of digital stories and narratives, illustrating multiple facets of self within a single-story arc and allowing insight into the construction of self in a digital workplace.

The photographs and texts elicited self-reflection by respondents around their own identity as teachers. Their choice of photographs reflected their individual academic roles as they saw them, allowing them to move from actor to spectator, and from internal to external perspectives in a dialectical way. Whilst the text-based descriptors used metaphor (Rorty, 1991) to illustrate their ideas, the participant involvement in the photographic image makes for an active role of subject and co-creator (Luvera, 2010). This was particularly insightful, as respondents also shared their emotions as well as critical insights around differing academic roles and the enactment of different ‘selves’ in the workplace, both traditional and digital. Traditional open coding method as per Glazer and Strauss (1999) was used to transcribe both interviews and pre-texts, once themes were agreed, researchers revisited photographic material. These provided visual representations of key ideas which reflected a narrated nature of reality.

### 4. DISCUSSION

Early analysis suggested that ideas were coalesced into themes of which three were selected for discussion here: *building online rapport, synthesizing material for students and building academic skills and the emergence of a dichotomy of individualization versus standardization.*

#### 4.1 Building Rapport Online

In a traditional blended environment, tutors are able to supplement online interactions based on an established student group experience. However, respondents working in a purely online context reported the challenges of building non-traditional cues for behavior, for example, the use of emoji’s, related to Taylor et al (2018: 58) comments on symbols that convey self in the digital world. One way of doing this was reported as repeated pausing, summarizing and checking in an absence of visual symbols of engagement. Another respondent compared a previous face to face set up with online teaching. When comparing experiences on the two, she noted, the loosening of personal ties, “I had such a rapport with my [face to face] students, and I prided myself on that, [moving online] it’s like breaking the umbilical cord as it were”.

## 4.2 Synthizing what Students need to know

With the maturing of digital communications, teaching staff reported how their role had changed from providing students with content and knowledge, to a focus on providing a synthesis in understanding and a pathway through the noise of almost infinite online content. One described himself as a “bridge”, and his role was to develop in students the skills to judge quality and content, saying that it was the “in between the information and the learning....that’s missing”

Another reported criticality as an increasingly fundamental tool for successful study today, expressing concern around how, for example, the importance of “interpretation of some of the ideas and the models” could become lost in what another participant reported as a “digital soup.”

With so much data and information available, the spotlight for respondents was on their abilities in teaching what was needed to interpret this material. The application of data analysis skills to industry was an important facet that came through from both cultures in securing student employability.

Many respondents highlighted a wish for best practice sharing in terms of keeping up with new technologies for teaching and learning. For those less confident on line, communities of practice to overcome reluctance away from tried and tested media formats. One tutor, who additionally worked as a trainer for other tutors in online provision said:

“....at the start they [some tutors] weren’t going to use the technology at all. At the end they came back and they were really excited developing new ways of using it and new approaches. And it didn’t take an awful lot of input to move them from one end of the spectrum to the other.

## 4.3 Standardization vs. Individualization

The move to open formats for online teaching, as opposed to a fixed group of 20 learners in a physical room for example, reduced personal bonds between student and tutor. The byproduct of this was an increased formalization and tutor’s propensity to stick to the prepared teaching materials rather than being more creative in how they help students achieve the learning objectives. This move to more standardization because of online tutorial equivalence initiatives by the institution led some tutors to report a feeling of stepping back and feeling less involved in the teaching process. One participant stated:

“I feel much less like a teacher.... far more like a, I don’t know, not a robot, but somebody who’s just delivering stuff.... My academic profile, it’s changing as a result”

In the Middle East University context, the cultural importance of face to face teaching meant that tutors remained focused on providing an individual interpretation of the material to meet learning objectives and there was no real focus on the need for equivalence and standardization. In this way the use of digital remained complementary to the individual teachers in terms of the amount and type of online activity. One respondent said of syllabus and evaluation:

“They’re very broad so that each individual can kind of, you know, do what they want to do professionally.... And so I can really do with it what I want, and for that matter, I can even change the learning objectives if I go through the proper procedures and the proper process. I mean, yes, complete and total autonomy for all intents and purposes.”

This might indicate that it was not digitalization per se that was impacting individual academic identity but rather the pedagogic structure and the need for institutional equivalence to administer it at a distance that was driving these changes to identity and contestation in what was the role of an academic.

## 5. CLOSING REMARKS

This paper is at the developmental stage, and we will benefit from feedback from conference delegates as we continue to explore this research agenda on perceptions of digital identities of educators. We would particularly welcome cross-cultural inputs on levels of digitization and e-learning in the Higher Education sphere.

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